

Called by God

By Bob Young

Calling to Christianity, 2 Pet. 1:5-11

General call to obedience and holiness, Eph. 4:1; 1 Cor. 1:2

Specific calls to work of ministry, to other works, OT prophets, the 12, Acts 16:10; Paul Acts 1—why Matthias? God was involved.

I hear fewer call stories today. I hear less about calls and more about careers, less about God's will for your life and more about recognizing an opportunity. On seminary campuses, I meet fewer students who say, "I'm here because God has called me into ministry," and more who say, "I'm just testing the waters by taking a few courses."

A calling is not simply putting together a career in ministry.

If we have lost our faith in the idea that calls continue today, then perhaps we have lost touch with an essential element that ministry desperately needs. The key questions are simple: *Does God still call as He once did? And do we know how to recognize and implement a call if it should come?* Do we have a special call today?

There is an old joke—so old that it may be unknown today and, therefore, recyclable.

A young farmer, standing in his field, observes a peculiar cloud formation. The clouds form the letters G, P, and C, and he thinks them a call from God: *Go preach Christ!*

The farmer rushes to the deacons of his church and insists that he has been called to preach. Respectful of his ardor, they invite him to fill the pulpit.

That Sunday, the sermon is long, tedious, virtually incoherent. When it finally ends, the leaders sit in stunned silence. Finally, a wizened deacon mutters to the would-be preacher, "Seems to me the clouds were saying 'Go plant corn.'"

If it really happened that way, it wouldn't be the first time there's been confusion about what it means to be called into ministry.

Nature of our calling

The concept of a *call* is one of the most profound of all biblical ideas. The Bible is riddled with stories about calls to men and women who, when summoned to service, went out and marked their generation in a particular way. Such calls had several commonalities.

Our call is from God, there is no self-generated call

→ In one way or another, calls originate with God. God *called* Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, and Amos (to name a few). Jesus *called* twelve men "to be with him," and then sent them out to disciple the nations. The Holy Spirit *called* Saul and Barnabas and others to apostolic opportunity. No one in the Bible anointed himself or herself.

Our call is unpredictable, surprising. Not visible to sight. Often don't see it coming. People in our congregations are called. Surprising, e.g. Judges, Amos, prophets...

→ Biblical calls were quite unpredictable. Gideon, for example, responded to his call, "How can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." Why David? Why Jeremiah? Why Simon Peter? And, of all people, why Saul of Tarsus who recollects, "I was a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man?"

When St. Francis was asked why God called him, he said, "God picks the weakest, the smallest, the meanest of men on the face of the earth, and he uses them."

Our call is to overwhelming objectives, impossible tasks.

→Biblical calls usually focus on mind-boggling, seemingly impossible objectives. Build a boat, Noah; lead a nation out of Egypt, Moses; face down a wicked king, Elijah; preach to the Gentiles, Paul. The call was so compelling that it gave courage to the one called.

Our call is unique in every case, unique person, unique situations. There is thus no pattern for the calling we discuss.

→Each biblical call was unique. No call seems like any other. The circumstances, the nature, the expectations of the call: all customized. When God wanted a word said or a people led, he mandated a person to make it happen in an unprecedented way.

Definition: God's calling occurs at the intersection of gifts, opportunity, and passion.

My call story.

I have lived my life under the discipline of a call—but didn't always call it that.

I liked church—singing, Bible classes, looking up verses, playing church.

In high school, I gained a love for words, for public speaking, for writing, for grammar. In college, I learned to love leadership.

Those in ministry told me they saw potential in me. My heart soared when I listened to people challenge us in the direction of Kingdom activity. I began to preach.

I realized with the help of others that my "instincts" (gifts?) were in ministry.

And now 43 years of this life have passed, and there has almost never been a time when I have not enjoyed life from that perspective: being there for people in their tough moments, encouraging them to be strong in the Lord, challenging them to personal growth in Christ-likeness, helping them discern *their* calling and giftedness.

For some the call story is dramatic. In one forceful moment comes a sense of conviction that God has spoken and directed. One is never again the same after this. For others the call is like a continual dripping: it just beats on you until you capitulate. "Okay. Okay!"

When one is called, financial security, location, notoriety, applause, and power become increasingly less important. Obedience is the primary issue. Let others feel free to build fortunes and empires; the call binds you to surrender yourself to the will of God. I fear this sounds overly pious, but it's been the perspective of called people for centuries.

Most could never tell you *why* they received the call. They are the first to admit that they are the chief of sinners (Paul's words), that they are insufficient for the task (also Paul's), and that they have occasionally desired, like Jonah, to run. But the call has prevailed. They understand Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

These are the called people who have, as James put it, a greater responsibility.

Several things authenticate a call. By that I mean things that convince us that G-P-C really does mean "go preach Christ" and not "go plant corn." A special call generally is the result of three or four things.

→**Calls are heard, they are certain**, God touched me, brought me where I am, I am specially selected for what I am doing where I am doing it.

There is a moment of certainty that God has put His hand upon you and nudged you toward a particular people, theme, or function.

Mary Slessor, who spent her life in Africa, heard Heaven speak through the death of her hero, David Livingstone. Before he died, he had written, "I direct your attention to Africa. I know that in a few years I shall be cut off in that country which is now open... Do not let it be shut again. Carry out the work I have begun. I leave it with you."

James Buchan, Slessor's biographer, writes, "Mary read the reports about her hero's death and a ridiculous idea began to come into her mind and to keep returning there as often as she threw it out: she was to follow Livingstone to Africa ... for over a year she tried to forget the idea. But she was not allowed to forget."

→**Calls are confirmed.** Most often friends and congregations confirm these calls. The genuineness of a call is *usually* (not always but *usually*) confirmed by others who discern the unique work of the Holy Spirit in a particular person.

The action of the prophets and teachers at Antioch who heard the Holy Spirit's call to Saul and Barnabas is a great example, as is the affirming mentorship that Aquilla and Priscilla gave to Apollos.

→**Calls are accompanied by giftedness.** Sometimes people are called before all of the gifts are in place, but calls bring also opportunities to develop gifts. God shapes us for our work.

Psychological tests do not take into account the gifting of God.

With a call comes giftedness—that empowerment of capacity and spirit that God visits upon the "call-ee." When such people are in alignment with their call, something powerful happens, and we, the observers, are all left in amazement.

"Go towards the poor," St. Francis heard God say, in his heart, through his friends, from inescapable confrontations with lepers. The Pope tried to make him an administrator, a builder of buildings, a functionary in the hierarchy. But Francis refused, because his instinct was tuned to the poor. And all who had known him as the frivolous son of a middle class cloth dealer marveled at the transformation. Intuitively, he knew what to do when he engaged the poor.

→**Calls show results, but the results are not in the outward trappings the world wants to measure.** Again there are exceptions, but the hard questions are these. Are people impacted by the person supposedly called? Are they drawn to Jesus? Do they grow in Christ-likeness? Are they motivated to greater commitment and vision? These are some of the questions likely to be relevant when a call is assessed.

When Eric Liddell, in [Chariots of Fire](#), said to his sister, "When I run, I feel God's pleasure," he put his finger on a hard-to-explain dimension of *call*. When one lives obediently in the center of a call, one feels God's pleasure; one knows joy.

Let us be frank: Men and women have obeyed God's call and become martyrs. Others have undertaken unspeakably difficult and discouraging tasks and barely survived. Some have lived obscure lives in far off corners of the world and have finished the course never feeling that they accomplished anything of measurable value.

There have been others, of course, whose lives have sparkled with spectacular results—who in their preaching, their writing, their organization-building, and their ability to envision and empower people have left their mark on church history. What did they all have in common? They *felt* God's pleasure; they had joy. Not a very scientific concept; but a very real experience.